

US POLICY OPTIONS IN SYRIA: AN ARGUMENT FOR DIPLOMACY

by

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Abstract

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The 'Arab Spring' revolutions in the Middle East are creating a new, complex environment with significant ramifications for both regional and international players. The family of Syrian President Bashar al Assad and its loyalists have ruled the country since 1970, oppressing the Sunni majority. In March 2011, opposition groups rebelled against the regime, with the conflict now entering its third bloody year. Faced with a continuously escalating and increasingly ambiguous situation on the ground in Syria, President Obama and his administration have struggled to find reasonable and actionable choices. What is clear is that the Syrian conflict is a destabilizing influence on the region and is a direct threat to US interests. In this paper we review current US policy towards Syria, and articulate three potential options for US involvement. Ultimately the administration has to choose between 1) intervention, 2) military aid to the rebels, or 3) renewed diplomacy. This paper advocates a new approach to diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict.

US POLICY OPTIONS IN SYRIA: AN ARGUMENT FOR DIPLOMACY

1. Introduction.

The 'Arab Spring' revolutions in the Middle East are creating a new, complex environment with significant ramifications for both regional and international players. An analysis of the Syrian Civil War indicates that the country is plagued by the same institutional problems that characterize most Arab oligarchies: unemployment, inflation, repression, corruption, and a lack of opportunity for youth. The family of Syrian President Bashar al Assad, its Alawite loyalists, and their non-Alawite allies, have ruled the country since 1970 (the Baath party, its political extension, has ruled Syria since 1963). The Alawites, making up roughly 12% of the population, have repressed the Sunni majority (74%) through institutional practices of dividing both military and commercial resources amongst themselves.¹ This cronyism is amplified by a regime elite that is related to Assad by both blood and marriage. In March 2011, in reaction to the 'Arab Spring' movement, Syrian protestors transitioned from peaceful demonstrations to armed resistance when it became apparent that the Assad regime had no intention of reforming. On the contrary, it instituted a policy of brutal crackdown on any defiance of the regime's authority. All of this is exacerbated by the regime's alliance with Iran. The age-old sectarian rift between Sunni and Shiite Islam, currently championed in the form of the Saudi monarchy for Sunni's and the Iran's Islamic Republic for the Shiite.² This competition is playing out today in Syria's nascent civil war. The Iranians have expended considerable resources in Syria propping up Assad. Saudi Arabia and its Gulf State allies are countering this Iranian influence with resources of their own to the opposition.³ Unfortunately, unlike the other Arab Spring movements that resulted in regime change (Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya), the pro-

longed Syrian conflict now approaching its third year and arguably in a period of stalemate, will most likely end in a failed state requiring large scale humanitarian intervention and reconstruction.

Faced with a continuously escalating and increasingly ambiguous situation on the ground in Syria, President Obama and his administration have struggled to find reasonable and actionable choices. The administration, in its overall efforts to change the Middle East equation, attempted to engage Syria in 2009-2010. These efforts bore little fruit as it became apparent that the Assad regime had no intention of abandoning its Lebanese client group Hezbollah.⁴ Syria continues to be on the US State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism. Information as to what is happening on the ground in Syria is often provided by sources with a bias and a political agenda. Current reporting suggests that over 60,000 Syrians have died in the conflict.⁵ Accounts of human rights abuses and massacres persist, with the majority attributed to government forces, though recent reporting has shown an upward trend in opposition group violence towards captives.⁶ Refugee estimates run at approximately one million in terms of both internally displaced persons and those who have crossed international borders into Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq. Each of these nations have announced refugee "red lines" which magnify an impending humanitarian crisis.⁷ Though current US policy towards Syria advocates regime change, the Obama administration has not publicly articulated a military intervention contingency (except in relation to Weapons of Mass Destruction).⁸

Clearly this is a problem of immense magnitude, with potentially dangerous consequences for US interests in the region. In this paper we will review the conflict

from the perspective of US policy. We will do this in two parts: 1) a review of current US policy in regard to Syria, and 2) a delineation of potential actions or policy adjustments that would support our national interests: specifically, an expansion of US diplomatic initiatives in the region in order to build consensus for a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

2. A Review of Current Policy.

Current U.S. policy in regard to Syria has four main objectives:

1. The end of the Assad regime
2. The replacement of the Assad regime with a government that does not threaten its neighbors, nor support Islamic extremism
3. The containment of the conflict's violence in order to not de-stabilize the region
4. To avoid a potential humanitarian disaster as Syria and their adjacent neighbors struggle to provide for the hundreds of thousands of refugees from the violence⁹

Critical Security Interests.

Events in Syria threaten three critical security interests of the United States as defined in the US Defense Strategy: 1) increased opportunities for Al Qaeda and Islamic extremists to de-stabilize the region, 2) potential proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), and 3) prolonged conflict that may cause a wave of regional instability helpful to Iranian hegemonic ambitions.¹⁰ These security concerns are interrelated. Credible media reporting indicates that Islamic extremist groups are supporting both indigenous and foreign fighter elements on the ground in Syria.¹¹ The Alawite minority rule, with its roots in Shiite Islam and politics of Baath Party socialism, are natural enemies of Sunni extremist groups. The paralysis of the regime to maintain

order and secure its borders has provided Al Qaeda and its affiliates with a unique opportunity to influence regime change in a major Arab country. This extremist agenda, and methods, as we have seen a trend towards suicide and car bombing, improvised explosive devices, and assassination, may be the gravest threat to Syrian and regional stability.¹²

The second major security concern, the potential proliferation of WMD, is related to the first in that Sunni extremist groups may have potential access to chemical and biological weapons if the regime is weakened significantly. The Assad regime has stockpiled WMD in numerous locations throughout the country as a hedge against both foreign intervention and preventative strike from Israel. While US and allied security services claim to have an accurate picture of Syria's stockpiles and are expending significant resources to monitor them, it is not conceivable that such monitoring can be completely effective.¹³ Both the United States and Israel have clearly indicated "red lines" in regard to WMD: any movement or transference of these weapons would constitute a direct threat and trigger an immediate military response. Israel's air strike in early February, 2013, on a convoy of weapons and a weapons factory is tangible proof that such a red line is not idle diplomatic chatter.¹⁴

Lastly, the isolation of the regime over the past decade and its decision to turn to Iran as a bulwark of support, has led to the expansion of the traditional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia to be played out in the conflict. This proxy struggle between the current champions of Shiite and Sunni Islam in Syria has introduced not only large amounts of weapons, money, and other resources into the conflict on both sides, but has also escalated the potential for regional spill-over and ensuing de-stabilization. For

example, as Turkey explores its emerging role as a regional player and supporter of Sunni rights, recent fighting close to its eastern border with Syria has increased tensions between the two nations.¹⁵ Reports of cross-border clashes between Syrian and Turkish forces are disturbing indicators of potential expansion of the conflict and ensuing regional instability. In addition, other reports indicate that Syrian politics are spilling over into Lebanon with various proxy players attacking one another in their mentor's interest.¹⁶

Current Obama Administration Efforts.

In order to achieve its objectives and secure its interests the administration has pursued a policy towards Syria that can be defined as a 'broad approach'—the results of which have been arguably mixed.¹⁷

- *Political Transition:* President Obama, as early as August 2011, has called for Bashar al Assad to step aside and allow for a peaceful transition to a national coalition government. The administration has been explicit in its requirement that such a coalition government must be inclusive and tolerant, with all minority groups represented (the ruling Alawite group as well).
- *Sanctions:* The Obama administration imposed strict sanctions on the Assad regime from the beginning of the conflict, and the Treasury Department has designated a long list of individuals with ties to the regime barring any access to the US financial system.¹⁸
- *Humanitarian Assistance:* Total US Government aid to Syria and her neighboring countries has topped \$130 million dollars for both fiscal years 2012 and so far in 2013. The most recent effort was announced by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in

September, 2012: the US would provide an additional \$30 million dollars to a variety of relief organizations to support those affected by the conflict.¹⁹

- *Military Aid:* So far the Obama administration has confined its support to various rebel groups to non-lethal technologies and training. For example, recent reporting has the US providing night vision goggles, medical supplies, and computer software to the rebels, as well as providing Internet-based training for their personnel engaged in diplomatic and strategic communication efforts.²⁰

- *Intelligence:* Extensive media reporting indicates that the Central Intelligence Agency is involved in adjacent countries to Syria, vetting various rebel groups and attempting to discern any ties to Al Qaeda or Islamic extremism. These efforts are multilateral in that much of their most accurate information is coming from intelligence services located in those countries. These efforts are critical if the administration chooses a more active role in Syrian internal affairs, thus defining what groups we can support towards a democratic, inclusive subsequent regime.²¹

- *Prevent Arms Supply to the Assad Regime:* The US government has worked with international and regional allies to prevent the Assad regime from resupplying itself with critical weapons platforms, such as helicopters, in order to suppress the rebellion.²²

- *Contingency Planning:* Press reports indicate that the US military has conducted significant contingency planning in case the Obama administration chooses military intervention as the only possible option to address threats on the ground in Syria.²³

- *Diplomacy:* US officials have labored intensively to steer the United Nations towards a Security Council resolution condemning the Assad regime. Three attempts to pass such a resolution over the past year were vetoed by both Russia and China, who fear

US influence in the region and the loss of an ally in Assad.²⁴ Each of these countries recognize that they are fighting a 'rearguard' action for the Assad regime, but have yet to see a way of extricating themselves from the situation. Russia, in particular, is sensitive to the fact that while their backing of Iran and Syria has given them real regional relevance, it has also made them vulnerable to the Sunni awakening inherent in the 'Arab Spring'. So far, we can categorize US diplomatic efforts in the light of this opposition as a distinct failure.

3. A Review of Potential Policy Options.

The administration's eight point strategy of utilizing diplomatic, information, military, and economic elements of power has failed to isolate the Assad regime in order to force it to capitulate or negotiate. All their efforts are stymied by Russia and China. Our review of U.S. interests and current policy in regard to Syria points to three policy options for achieving US objectives. Ultimately the administration has to choose between intervention, military aid, or renewed diplomacy.

Military Intervention.

This option is the most dangerous of the three options considered. There is a wide spectrum of military activity the US and its allies can execute in order to promote its interests in Syria. Any contingency is dependent upon the assessment of the threat on the ground. For example, the introduction of 'no-fly' or 'safe-zones' would provide respite for hard pressed rebel groups and civilians threatened by the regime's crackdown. In addition, badly needed humanitarian aid could then be safely introduced into the country and do much to avoid a humanitarian disaster. Currently the introduction of US forces into the conflict in Syria could only be justified under the vague

concept of 'responsibility to protect' innocent civilian loss of life.²⁵ It is assessed that at this point in the conflict there is not domestic political consensus to do so with the inherent risk of US loss of life.²⁶ However, the existence of large stockpiles of WMD constitutes a direct threat to the US and its closest ally Israel. If a faltering regime sees their use as a last resort for survival, or these stockpiles are threatened by extremist groups, the US would be forced to introduce air assets and ground troops into the country in order to prevent such a scenario.

As already discussed, the likelihood of establishing any sort of international or regional coalition against the Assad regime that supports a direct military intervention is predicated on UN support and condemnation. As in the case of Libya, almost all of our traditional allies, with the exception of Israel, are reluctant to act without the sanction of a UN resolution. At this point in the conflict direct military action in Syria by the US would most likely be a unilateral action. It is also likely that the Assad regime would perceive the introduction of 'no-fly' or 'safe-zones' as a violation of sovereignty and thus an act of war. This option then carries the real risk of an internal Syrian conflict devolving into a general regional war.

Direct Military Support to Rebel Groups.

This option proposes that the US provide direct military aid to rebel groups opposing the Assad regime. It would require extensive vetting of current rebel groups conducting armed and political resistance to the Assad regime, a process that is currently ongoing, and then establish ties with those groups that are deemed to correspond with US interests of an inclusive and tolerant post-Assad government. These groups would need to be then organized into a cohesive coalition, with a

representative body to establish ties with the US and its allies. Until recently opposition outside of Syria had coalesced around two political blocks: The Syrian National Council (SNC) and the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change (NCB). After recent calls by US diplomats for the Syrian opposition groups to provide a more united front for diplomatic engagement, a new umbrella group emerged on the international stage in mid-November, 2012: the National Coalition for Revolutionary Forces and the Syrian Opposition (NCRFSO). This group was the product of an opposition conference sponsored by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in Doha, Qatar.²⁷ While it now encompasses all major opposition groups outside of Syria, it has yet to establish strong ties to actual rebel groups inside of Syria. The fact is the character of the opposition is still emerging, as it struggles to hold its own against the regime's security apparatus.

Direct US involvement in this crucial development process holds the promise of our being able to decisively influence the character of the revolt, specifically the marginalization of extremists and the emergence of political moderates as the dominant faction in the revolt. The rebels have shown an extraordinary resiliency and strength in the face of a highly organized, well-armed, and entrenched regime.²⁸ Clearly US economic and military aid has the potential of decisively affecting the outcome of the conflict. This option recognizes that the conflict may be immune to political solution. The Assad regime may perceive that fighting it out, with the slim possibility of crushing the rebellion, as their only viable alternative. This option already has some domestic political support, though the administration still opposes such an action.²⁹ Both political parties recognize the benefit of toppling the repressive Assad regime, with the added

benefit that one of Israel's most intractable enemies, Hezbollah, would lose a major benefactor.

However, there are significant risks involved in this option. First, there exists the potential that US support to a narrow block of groups would create a civil war within a civil war—with rebel groups now fighting each other, along with the Assad regime. Second, our understanding of the political, ideological, and religious agendas of rebel groups is only cursory at best. Often extremist groups will work hard to portray themselves as moderates when there is the promise of additional arms and resources. Reporting indicates that these groups have developed a media savvy in terms of speaking the diplomatic phrases that appeal to western media and human rights groups.³⁰ US interests are undermined by the arming and support of groups that ultimately have no desire for regional stability.

The Limits of US Power.

In considering these first two options for US policy toward Syria, more needs to be said in regard to the current limits of US power projection into the region. A realistic assessment of US political and moral will for intervention of any kind makes these options virtually infeasible. Congress does have its share of interventionist voices—most notably neo-conservative advocates such as Senator John McCain (R-AZ). For example, Senator McCain recently addressed the Munich Security Conference and demanded that the US military use its Patriot missile batteries in Turkey to down Syrian warplanes—“we should be ashamed of our collective failure to come to the aid of the Syrian people”, he lectured the assembled leaders.³¹ However recent policy actions by the administration, as well as polling of US domestic public opinion on Syria, shows a

clear lack of interest for intervention. In addition, the looming 'sequestration' deadline has the Defense Department extremely wary of entangling the US military in another large-scale contingency operation.

In terms of policy, the administration went through significant internal debate over US support of French intervention in Mali. While eventually the US acquiesced to French requests for logistical and intelligence support in the conflict, the administration was anxious over the possibility of an extended and escalating entanglement in another foreign internal conflict.³² In regard to Syria, in either the case of armed intervention, even a limited one of a 'no-fly' zone to tip the scales for the rebels, or materiel support to select rebel groups, the administration is arguably correct in surmising that such support would inevitably escalate.³³ The American public simply does not have the appetite for another US intervention into the internal politics of the Middle East. Recent Pew Research Center polls indicate that less than a quarter of Americans support intervention of any kind in Syria. When asked about deploying US ground troops, that support shrinks to less than 14%.³⁴ If twelve years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan have taught the US public anything, it is that nation building cannot be done on the cheap. Both the administration and the public recognize that US intervention in these conflicts will likely cost a great deal in terms of money, resources, and casualties.

Finally, the military itself is under extreme duress, and not simply from a 'war-weariness' of the force after two major contingency operations. With extensive budget cuts all but a reality, and the administration articulating a National Security Strategy emphasizing the Pacific region, the Pentagon believes itself to be over-stretched.³⁵

Diplomatic Rapprochement.

In simple terms, the US would offer both economic and political incentives to both Russia and China that divorce these two states from the Assad regime. As members of the UN Security Council, these two nations exercise veto power over any resolutions condemning Syria. Such a resolution is a critical aspect of any effective future action against the Assad regime. If the US expects the support of the European Union, NATO, the Arab League, or any regional allies for that matter, it will require the imprimatur of the Security Council.³⁶ It is clear that administration officials are wary of Russia and China, but to ignore or attempt to circumvent their ability to influence the region is counter-productive. Broadly speaking, the US needs to assure Russia of its position at the table in brokering a post-conflict government in Syria, specifically one which is inclusive of the Alawite minority (Russia's traditional ally), and in this way allow them to maintain their regional influence.³⁷ In addition, the US should use its strong influence amongst the oil-producing Gulf States, in particular Saudi Arabia, to encourage negotiations between them and Beijing. In so doing, the US may be able to garner if not overt support of Russia and China, then at least the necessary abstentions required to move the Security Council. The effect of a UN resolution, along with the de facto isolation of Syria, may convince the Assad regime that negotiated settlement is their only option.

The obstacles to this option concern two factors. First, domestic US politics would require a bipartisan backing of such diplomatic initiatives. Congressional and US lobby factions in regard to Israel would be suspicious of any rapprochement with Moscow and Beijing.³⁸ The administration would need to reassure these groups that

inclusion of Russia and China may constitute the best alternative for ousting Assad, while maintaining regional stability and minimizing the brutal violence to civilians which characterizes this conflict. Second, Israel itself would also need to be reassured that such initiatives are in their long term security interests. A negotiated settlement that would allow a peaceful transition to a post-Assad regime is the best chance of ensuring that a tolerant, inclusive government can be constructed. This option would appeal to most regional and international players, as it emphasizes diplomacy and negotiation, and minimizes the potential of violent overthrow of the Assad regime.

4. Advocating Adjusted Approaches to Diplomacy.

It is the recommendation of this paper that the US pursue the last of these three policy options. The recommendations included in this policy option can be summarized as a 'Big Tent' approach to diplomacy. Current administration efforts at diplomatic solutions to the Syrian conflict reflect a policy of exclusion to Russia and China, that is, all efforts attempt to either marginalize or circumvent their respective influences in the region.³⁹ Unfortunately this policy of exclusion has netted meager results as Russia and China wield significant influence both in the UN and in the Middle East region. This policy option recognizes the *fact* of Russian and Chinese power in the region, and rather than excluding it, offers three significant diplomatic initiatives for incorporating their efforts into an overall US strategy.

This policy option does not rule out the potential use of military force or support as the ultimate solution to the Assad regime and the US interest in a stable and peaceful Middle East region. However, it takes into consideration three facts related to the use of military force and its inherent risks. First, the legitimate use of military force in

the Islamic world requires extensive diplomatic preparation, in respect to UN resolutions and at least the perception amongst Arab states that all peaceful efforts have been exhausted. If not, the Arab backlash to the precipitous use of force could undermine any US efforts in the region for the foreseeable future. Second, military force carries with it the risk of general regional conflict. The Assad regime may find it expedient to spread the conflict to neighbors such as Jordan, Turkey, and Israel, with potentially catastrophic results in terms of casualties and the internal politics of these nations. Third, the resulting chaos of violent regime change carries with it the significant potential of the loss of accountability in the regime's biological and chemical weapons. All three of these considerations are high risk scenarios that threaten US interests in the region.

Critical Assumptions.

This policy option is predicated on three critical assumptions:

- Effective application of pressure on the Assad regime cannot be achieved through unilateral US action. Current administration efforts to isolate the regime politically and economically have achieved only marginal results. The moral and material support of Russia and China ultimately undermines their effectiveness.
- Any military option will require UN support and a broad coalition of allies. If the US expects the support of the European Union, NATO, the Arab League, or any regional allies for that matter, it will require a resolution from the Security Council. While US military capabilities are adequate to the task of regime change by force, the perceived lack of legitimacy without UN support would in the long term negate any immediate positive results.

- Russia and China are open to diplomatic persuasion. As a traditional ally of Syria, Russia has leveraged tremendous influence in the Middle East and used this as a counter-balance to the US relationship with Israel. However, Moscow recognizes that the Assad regime is not likely to weather the conflict, even if the regime manages to prolong its lifespan through brutal repression.⁴⁰ Therefore, it is looking for an understanding with the West and an honorable way out. China, on the other hand, is simply looking for opportunity to make itself a regional player—most likely with the opportunity to develop economic ties and energy resources from the area.⁴¹ Diplomatic engagement increases our ability to influence their actions.

Russian Influence in Syria.

Currently there is a substantial disconnect between the leaders of the rebellion inside and outside of Syria. It is critical that this link-up be made as soon as possible in order to provide legitimacy to the NCRFSO and influence the political stance of rebel groups in Syria. This is necessary to counter-act efforts by groups such as Al Qaeda or the Al Nusra front to ‘hijack’ the revolution for Sunni extremism.⁴² This represents a tremendous opportunity for the US to engage Russia and include their efforts in a unified approach to the Assad regime. Ultimately Russia wants to maintain its influence in the region. Whether that influence is wielded through Assad or a coalition government that replaces him is not relevant to Russian foreign policy.⁴³ What is relevant is fifty years of Russian experience, investment, and understanding of Syrian politics—Russia wants to protect its interests. Russian diplomats bring a vast knowledge of the internal workings of Syrian politics, commercial elites, and military leaders. This makes Russia a unique player in Syria.

US diplomacy needs to engage Russia as a conduit for NCRFSO relations with the opposition in Syria. Russian ties with the regime will also support negotiations and eventual transition of Assad from power. While specifics such as elections, timetables, and power-sharing can be worked out in the future, our only non-negotiable stipulation must be the inclusion of all minorities in any coalition government. While critical to any post-conflict settlement, it also is an added incentive to the Alawite community to sever ties with the Assad regime and their cronies. Russian mediation brings to former regime elements a guarantee that Alawite minority leaders will not be persecuted, but rather, included in any coalition government.⁴⁴ In exchange for this cooperation, US diplomatic signals need to assure Russia that its interests will be protected in Syria. In essence, US efforts will center on transitioning Russian support from the Assad regime to the opposition, with an understanding that the US will not attempt to undermine Russia's 'special' relationship with Syria.

Chinese Brokered Peace Talks.

In recent months diplomatic efforts on the part of the UN Special Envoy to Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi, have resulted in some significant developments. While China has been sympathetic to the Assad regime, this has stemmed primarily from their stated policy of opposition to foreign intervention in a nation-state's internal politics.⁴⁵ However, in early November, 2012, after a visit by Brahimi, China unveiled a four point proposal for resolving the conflict in Syria.⁴⁶ This announcement comes on the heels of a visit to China in August of a senior aide to Assad.⁴⁷ While the specifics of their proposal are important, what is actually critical is China clearly signaling that they want to be a diplomatic player in the region. US diplomacy must seize on this Chinese

overture to negotiate a peaceful solution to the conflict. Like with Russia, by using China as a mediator between regime and opposition, we both enhance Chinese prestige while simultaneously tying that prestige to the success of the negotiations. It is recommended that as an initial move in this process that we influence the GCC (through our relationship with its principle member Saudi Arabia) to request China to host the next iteration of NCRFSO talks. In addition, this allows China to facilitate negotiation between opposition and regime—building on our previous recommendation of Russian influence on the regime to negotiate. China will be seen by the Assad regime as a fresh perspective in the conflict, one not readily influenced by US or European interests, and with the backing of the GCC, China will have credibility with the opposition. Besides the aforementioned benefits of international prestige as peace broker, China will clearly enjoy a new relationship with the GCC members as a partner in regional peace efforts. China will perceive this relationship as an opportunity for economic ties and understandings.

Planning For State Failure.

Finally, this diplomatic-heavy approach also recognizes that the US must conduct extensive diplomacy and contingency planning for a post-conflict Syria. If the Assad regime falls, it is difficult to envision a stable result. In Iraq, we saw the results of regime change and the loss of state-facilitated order. The most likely outcome would be an ugly world of revanchist violence, crime, warlordism, potential secessionist movements, and economic disaster.⁴⁸ It is critical that the US and its international partners are prepared to provide the necessary resources to Syria to rebuild its economy, political institutions, and domestic security apparatus in order to stabilize their

internal situation. If not, the danger of Syria devolving into a 'failed state', with all of the inherent dangers to regional stability, may become a reality. A Syria, under the control of an extreme Islamist regime (with Iranian support), or a lawless patchwork of competing warlords, would provide fertile soil for the kind of transnational terrorist groups (armed with WMD) that are a direct threat to US interests. How then can this be done, given the limitations of US national power already discussed in this paper?

In broad terms, it requires a regional lead approach to coalition building and planning. The United States and its European allies are unlikely to sustain the kind of intervention required, either militarily or economically.⁴⁹ However, there are regional players that have vital interests in a stable Syria that can lead, for example, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. The Turks, as a neighbor, moderate Islamist state with a populace sincerely concerned about the Syrian people, and a regional power, have the resources to provide a stabilization force on the ground.⁵⁰ Such a force and the security it brings, as Iraq also has taught us, is the essential element of any nation-building effort. The other main element is financial support, which the Saudis have the resources to provide. What the United States and its allies can offer is the kind of technical support necessary to plan and repair their economy, political institutions, and infrastructure. What all of this requires is that the international community plan early and coordinate its resources. US diplomatic efforts, while continuing to push for peaceful resolution to the conflict, must also plan for failure and build towards a coalition to stabilize Syria in the event of regime collapse.

5. Conclusion.

Diplomacy, then, with the potential of a peaceful transition of authority to a coalition government is the best possible resolution for the conflict. The support of Russia and China is essential to such an outcome. Using Russia as a contact with rebel groups, and potentially vetting of insurgent groups (considering Chechnya, Russia has no love for Sunni extremists), allows Russia to transition from its failed policy of supporting the anti-American Shiite forces and support the 'Arab Spring'. Engaging China as a sponsor of peace talks adds significant prestige to their foreign policy portfolio while providing them with an opportunity to engage in economic development and opportunity. Of course, neither of these initiatives guarantees their support, or at least abstention, when it comes to a UN Security Council vote. However, securing their meaningful involvement in the diplomatic process ties their interests then to a successful outcome. If that process fails and a humanitarian crisis or regime collapse ensues, then they may be more amenable to stronger action. In either case, their support in nation-building a post-Assad Syria would be invaluable.

Our allies in the region, and Israel itself, recognize the power and influence of Russia and China. While certainly Israel is wary of both, they have a history of engagement with any power that respects their sovereignty. All regional players would benefit from a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Syria. The only meaningful opposition to this option that may be anticipated is from US domestic politics. The administration needs to be prepared to engage across the congressional spectrum to alleviate concerns over partnering with Russia and China in Middle East negotiations. Ultimately, these two powers are engaged in the process, whether we want them there

or not. Objections based on the risks of promoting a non-democratic power's interests in the region denies this reality. The recognition of their influence, and its incorporation into US diplomatic strategy, may garner significant results. Ultimately, a strong and creative diplomatic approach to Syria, both in terms of conflict resolution and post-Assad stability, provides the US with a 'middle way' between the current false choice between either intervention or doing nothing.

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